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AUTHOR Klein, Jeanne
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ABSTRACT

Some parents fear that what their children learn in school theatre programs departs from family values. School theatre proponents have opened a Pandora's box by promoting theatre's potential to teach, rather than focusing solely on its aesthetic goals. Both sides in the theatre censorship controversy share the misperception that theatre causes behavioral changes, when in fact there is no proof of causation. Furthermore, directors cannot control audiences' interpretations of plays, even if the audiences consist of children. An overriding fear is self-censorship. There is a concern among school play directors that a particular play might prompt theatre program opponents to harass a school board over some highly exaggerated controversy. A teacher finds herself "editing" suggestive and loaded words and gestures as well as sexist and racist references out of scripts, for fear of criticism. School play directors must continue to select worthwhile scripts based upon what teachers know about children; to direct challenging plays; and to educate audiences. Directors can prepare for controversy by: (1) avoiding inflammatory concepts while highlighting positive themes; (2) allowing teachers a sense of ownership in play selection; and (3) evaluating plays in advance on paper. Teachers must empower children to express freely their perceptions of their theatre. (SG)

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Censorship Battles in University Theatre for Young Audiences

Jeanne Klein

Director, KU Theatre for Young People
317 Murphy
University of Kansas
Lawrence, KS 66045

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"The greatest thing we have to fear is fear itself." FDR's slogan about World War II certainly applies to today's censorship battles between university/professional theatres and school districts. Right-wing, fundamentalist parents are deeply frightened that their children are learning something at school and in the theatre--anything not taught in their biblical homes. Unfortunately, we ourselves opened this Pandora's box by promoting theatre's potential to teach, rather than focusing solely on its aesthetic goals. Today, we face parents and teachers who are frightened by the power of theatre to touch their children's hearts and minds--afraid that a one-hour play will unravel their six to twelve years of indoctrination.

Paradoxically, these people understand the religious ritual of theatre. They know the power of the Word. Like the Bibles they interpret literally, they confuse theatre's fictive world with live reality. Like children, they confuse characters with actors; scripts with production values; the map with the territory. (show Magritte) They think this is a pipe--even though it says it isn't and you can't smoke it.

But perception is reality. In theatre, we see the good, the beauty, the Truth. They see the bad, the ugly, the Truth. They search for sin--and find it. We see the whole play and its "poetic justice." They see only the drama's conflict--usually without seeing the play at all. But ironically, we share a common misperception: that theatre causes behavioral changes, when in fact, there is no empirical proof of causation, negative or positive. Like the research which finds that television

doesn't cause violence or prosocial changes in stereotypic attitudes (e.g., Friedrich and Stein 1973), theatre probably reinforces predispositions that already exist. Though theatre imitates those predispositions, teachers still provide anecdotal evidence that children imitate only negative, seldom positive, stage behaviors.

The First Amendment has given individual U.S. citizens the right to voice their objections to words, behaviors, and symbols deemed "unsuitable" for young audiences. It's given us the right to produce theatre on our artistic terms--but only inside the walls of our theatres, as Orlin has pointed out (Corey 1989). But there can be no "majority rule and minority rights" when minority rights infringe upon the majority rules--that is, if artistic and academic freedoms still rule in this country.

When a vocal minority finds a children's play "offensive" and "inappropriate," how does the theatre minority fight back just as "offensively" when a silent majority doesn't care whether or not their children see plays at all? We can't change closed, intolerant minds with rational, defensive arguments. Such discourse only fuels the flames by giving them more words to misquote and take out of context. How can we "just say no" without losing our audiences, our theatres, our freedoms of artistic expression? If we cancel school matinees when parents and administrators balk, no one knows what they're missing because theatre has been missing from their lives all along. For those few parents who make theatre a regular part of their

cultural lives, they will continue to bring their children to public performances. So, how can we turn theatre illiteracy into positive enlightenment?

(show Magritte again) Perception is reality. (This could be an artistic statement about reality and illusion, and it could be a promotion of smoking, which leads to cancer and death, the devil's work.) Meanings are in people, not plays, and we must acknowledge and find ways to deal with the exaggerated meanings some people find in our children's productions. Like Vaclav Havel, we could disguise our allegories in deeper, more abstract ways, but we risk losing and confusing our youngest audiences in the process--unless we ourselves teach aesthetic education in local schools at the earliest ages--on top of producing theatre.

You've already read about my experiences in Lawrence, Kansas (Klein 1989). Suffice it to say, that, even in the land of Oz, the Wizard is still suspect. Based on written evaluations of our productions, teachers still find negative verbal and physical behaviors "offensive." During last year's "bear" season, they had few problems with Winnie-the-Pooh because it was a familiar, and therefore "safe," play choice--"relevant to children" and "something they can identify with." (Teachers tend to confuse children's choices with their own childhood choices.) "Familiar" means "having detailed knowledge of." Teachers (and most children) do not have a "detailed knowledge" of theatre. Theatre is completely foreign to them and, unfortunately, they'd rather keep it that way. They don't know that a play's plot, by

definition, presents a negative problem which is resolved; that theatre presents questions, rather than black and white answers to social dis-eases. Instead, they firmly believe (faithfully) that theatre should be an entertaining demonstration of good manners and moral behaviors to discipline children and make them laugh only at the appropriate times--just like the 18th and 19th centuries, as Jonathan Levy's (1987, 43-55) historical research has shown.

So, my production of Gilles Gauthier's I Am a Bear! for the intermediate grades provoked negative reactions because I broke their perceived rules. Teachers wrote:

> The name-calling ["fat, lazy slob"] and the behavior toward the bear was too strong for children. It was not a pleasant feeling during the whole play; too much yelling and the play did not express anything positive or show kindness.
>
> Children need to see better ways of handling situations that are either easy or difficult. No one likes to be yelled at or put down; nor should we enjoy watching it.

Another wrote:

> I was somewhat concerned with the violence such as name calling, pushing.... These activities were looked upon as humorous as the audience quite often laughed. I feel my students cannot always distinguish between right and wrong in their daily lives. I deal with a group of children where name calling and pushing is commonplace in their homes. I

think these activities need to be discouraged rather than "glorified" on stage.

Children's play reviews and comments were also negative--and favorable--and contradictory, just like their teachers:

I didn't like the play because of how they were treating the Bear. Once they finally convinced him he wasn't a bear, someone else said he was. I don't like seeing this type of thing happening anywhere, even on stage.

There wasn't really a meaning to the play.

Wasn't realistic (bears can't talk).

In contrast, one child wrote:

I liked I Am a Bear! because you don't see a play like [that] so often. And it was sad. And it was happy. And it was funny. Then the play sent out a message.

Indeed, I chose this play because it was a sad, serious story with humorous and poignant moments--something out of the ordinary, as Catherine Dezseran (1987) has pointed out. Throughout rehearsals, we were striving to portray the Bear's identity dilemma seriously, and we wanted audiences to feel sorry for the Bear and, yes, to feel offended by the factory characters' cruel abuse of him--responses we achieved. However, many school audiences translated this offense to the production as a whole--(show Magritte) they confused the map with the territory. In my mind, the Bear symbolized children who are emotionally and physically abused by adults, but who feel defenseless and can do nothing in the face of authoritarian

power. Apparently, few people saw these metaphoric connections. I hoped that this animal would provoke identification about self-concept, and in some cases it did. But, on the whole, most sophisticated sixth graders thought the Bear character made the play "juvenile" and "babyish." Because many audiences did not "get my message," I felt that I failed them--the children, not the teachers.

But through it all, I also learned that, like the Bear, I am who I am--a female director trying to nurture children with my emotional truths and aesthetic choices. As directors, we cannot control audiences' interpretations of plays. They are entitled to their own "readings," just as we have a right to our production concepts. We cannot control or change children's acclimation and conditioned laughter to cartoon violence, (although I tried to do so at one climatic moment in the play with mixed results). Nor can we stop the violence witnessed daily in the media or children's homes. We cannot know when a child's laughter is a nervous response to the recognizable familiarity of domestic violence. Child abuse, in all its forms, is more "obscene" to me than any play deemed "offensive."

Today, my greatest fear is self-censorship. I'm afraid to produce any play which will trigger a fire-and-brim storm in my community. I'm afraid to create a reason for fundamentalists to harrass my delicately balanced school board with another highly exaggerated controversy. According to my district's fine arts director, it's still too soon to produce <u>Wiley and the Hairy Man</u>;

and though he can't find anything wrong with Suzan's (Zeder) A Play Called Noah's Flood, who knows what a fundamentalist might find. (Each year, I give him copies of our scripts, so he can say he's found nothing "offensive" about them when parents harass him.) Now that I have a deaf actor coming up in the ranks, I want to direct Mother Hicks before he graduates--but "they say she's a witch."

I find myself "editing" suggestive and loaded words and gestures from my actors' mouths and bodies, because I don't want to give teachers anything more to complain about. I don't want them to focus on one 30-second moment to the exclusion of the play's resolution about self-esteem, friendship, or following your dreams. I "censor" sexism and racism in plays by altering interpretations with casting choices, even though my audiences seldom notice or appreciate feminist and multicultural approaches given their stereotypic perspectives.

Refusing to submit to community pressures by producing only familiar, "safe" titles every time is a difficult challenge. We must continue to select worthwhile scripts based on what we know about children (not adults); to direct plays which challenge us personally with innovative ideas and styles; and to educate audiences theatrically with new allegorical interpretations and design approaches to classic literature. When productions have the potential to thwart a community's perceived expectations (as most should), then we can prepare for controversy through our own "offensive" actions:

First, plan and write study guides carefully by avoiding "inflammatory" words and concepts and by dwelling on the many positive metaphoric themes which reverberate from plays. "Prove" that child-like characters' behaviors are the same behaviors found in the child development literature, and that post-play discussions are productive opportunities to reflect upon and reinforce prosocial ideas and behaviors.

Second, allow teachers a sense of ownership in the play selection process, without resorting to a censorship committee, by asking for their "curricular" opinions and preferences. Ask for "theatre consultants" and follow-up on the opportunity to educate individual teachers personally on the repertoire. Inform them of the available, familiar titles by explaining copyright laws which forbid alterations of scripts and by noting literary, budgetary, and production problems: for example, "too much dialogue and not enough action" (a common teacher complaint); prohibitive royalty costs; lack of a musical director; too many men to cast from the university's larger female pool; not enough rehearsal or construction time to build sets and costumes. Let them know they won't be seeing <u>The Secret Garden</u> until they agree to changing lunch and bus schedules for a two-hour play. Report survey results and show them how divided they are on which plays they think are appropriate for each grade level.

Third, and most importantly, evaluate every production <u>on paper</u> by gathering and disseminating teachers' assessments (Davis and Evans 1987, 295-96) and children's letters, and by

interviewing children individually after performances. For teachers, include such positive questions as: "What main ideas or themes did children understand best?" "What scenes or segments held their attention?" "What comments did you overhear them say during and after the play?" Separate negative reasons by asking, "What theatre conventions (staging, acting, scenery, costumes, props, lights, sound, and special effects) confused children?" Use a 7-point Likert scale, so when teachers circle "4," you can note their ambivalence to an ambiguous production. After gathering children's most direct responses, publish the results to prove that child audiences don't dwell on "offensive" aspects the way some adults do. (For example, only 8 first graders, out of the 38 interviewed, talked about the characters spitting water in Noodle Doodle Box.)

In other words, we must empower children to express freely their perceptions of their theatre--realities which can be both frightening and reassuring to our artistic egos. Meanwhile, it may take another generation before this political, conservative cycle runs its course. In Quebec, it took one company ten years before schools accepted their now-classic production Sex Is Not For Kids (Les enfant n'ont pas de sexe?). As one of their actors told me, "I don't provoke for the sake of provocation. I am an artist." As artists, let's keep our focus on theatre, children, and perhaps some "pipe dreaming," and not on the debilitating fears of censorship which surround us today.

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